The Creation of Character Attachment in Video Games

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Introduction

Over the past twenty years, video games have positively exploded, permeating childhoods everywhere and causing some researchers to even suggest that a childhood *without* video games would be abnormal (Durkin, 2005). Unfortunately, video games and, more specifically, video game characters are often blamed by the media for the negative behaviors exhibited by both children and adults (Kushner, 2005; Lawsuit Filed Against Sony, 2003; Surgeon General, 2001). However, these sources offer little to no support for these claims. Though research on negative effects of video games is abundant (e.g. Lee and Peng, 2005; Chory-Assad and Mastro, 2000; Anderson and Dill, 2000; Ballard and West, 1996; Anderson and Ford, 1986) there have been studies done showing positive effects of video games as well (Lieberman, 2005). Here, we will focus on positive, or at least neutral, effects, not as they relate to video games in general but as they relate specifically to video game *characters*.

The Creation of Attachment

Role-playing games allow the individual to create and personalize the game character that the player chooses to play with, and role-playing games are one of the more popular types of games in the industry. As of this writing, according to Gamespot.com, of the three most popular video games, numbers two and three (*The Elder Scrolls IV* and *Final Fantasy VII*) are role-playing games (Gamespot.com, 2005). There exists the ability to personalize the main character in the game. Instead of simply playing with what one is given (in the popular Mario Brothers series, players use predetermined characters), the player is responsible for the creation and development of his or her character, potentially leading to a feeling of attachment to this character that would be greater than the attachment felt with a character into whom the player did *not* have any input. Is it possible, then, that *attachment* to video game characters in general might have effects on the individual game player?

Studies conducted using the concepts of identification, imaginative identification, parasocial interaction, and social presence only allow us to understand a part of what occurs when individuals play video games. In order to understand all the aspects and how they work together in affecting outcomes of video game play, we must combine them to form a new concept that we refer to as *attachment*. It is not *only* whether or not a player identifies with a video game character, or *only* whether a player feels as if he or she knows and is friends with the character. It is an overall feeling of attachment with these four different aspects that can help us to understand the effects of video game characters on video game players.

The Concept of Attachment

Though each of the four separate ideas contained within the larger concept of attachment can be used for research purposes, we can better study motivations for playing as well as effects *of* playing video games where individuals can form an attachment to a character—namely, role-playing games, but even in general games such as *Super Mario Brothers* or even first-person shooter games—by using the idea of attachment, because it then becomes possible to study many different games and even different

genres of games using the same measure.

This paper will examine the idea of attachment using the following format:

1. What do we mean by *attachment*?
2. What are the theoretical backgrounds for the ideas used in *attachment*?
3. Why is the creation of this new concept useful?

*What do we mean by **attachment**?*

Attachment is a new concept, defined as the perceived connection felt by a video game player toward a video game character. It may be either a positive connection *or* a negative connection, in that a player may feel a strong connection with a character because the game player *dislikes* the character as easily as he or she may feel a positive connection because he or she *likes* the character. Although this sounds like a rewording of parasocial interaction theory, we are also combining ideas from social presence and identification to give us a better, more generalizable method of studying attitude and behavior toward characters. Thus, we have created it in order to be able to study the connections formed between game players and video game characters over a broad range of game genres, rather than using each individual theory discussed below to study each genre separately.

To create the concept of attachment as we are using it here, we draw from the theories of parasocial interaction, social presence, identification, and imaginative identification. The theory of parasocial interaction has been applied liberally to television and movie characters, and to some extent, radio personalities as well. However, the development of video games as a research area represents a new arena in which to study this theory. Identification will be defined here as it was in Cohen's research (2001) as a combination of empathy, perspective-sharing, internalization, and absorption, as well as Goldie's idea of imaginative identification, defined as "empathy" and "in-shoes imagining" (2002). And finally, as developed by Short, Williams, and Christie in 1976, social presence refers to the awareness of an individual of the presence of a communication interaction partner.

In Horton & Wohl's discussion of perceived social interaction (1956), it was noted that TV show hosts are one of the examples wherein hosts are intending to speak directly to the viewer. The same can be said of certain video game characters. Many game characters "talk" to you as a player, instructing you on how to operate your controller, which combination of button presses, etc., make the on-screen character do certain things, and sometimes tell you the background story. Games such as *Glover* instruct you directly. Games such as Disney's *102 Dalmatians* and *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* instruct you by way of the game character having a discussion with another character. But certain characters address you directly. For instance, in both *The Sims* and *The Sims 2*, if your character needs something, from time to time, he or she will turn to you by way of facing out of the computer screen, wave his or her hands, and demand your attention.

However, in RPG's (role-playing games), you *are* the character and you are addressed as such. In *The Blackstone Chronicles*, *you* are instructed that *your* son has been kidnapped and *you* must solve the mystery. The game addresses you directly, and you have a first-person view of the rooms through which you pass, the items you inspect, and even the documents you are required to read. It is this degree of self-inclusion in the game that makes the study of role-

playing games important, and that illustrates the importance of character in this research. A character is then not merely just a presence on screen but almost like a role you are to take on and play.

With both of these examples (characters in *The Sims* that actually require attention and care, and the character in a role-playing game that you actually become), it is easy to see the differences. One game requires you to care about and for your character in that it is an outside entity that relies upon you for support and survival. The other game requires you to become the character, and you are then taking care of and caring about yourself. This is where it becomes apparent that a new idea—that of *attachment*—is necessary. With a game wherein you *become* the character, the concept of identification can be used to explain how you play the game, why you play the game, and even *if* you play the game. But identification doesn't work with video game characters that are not actually *you*. Conversely, parasocial interaction or social presence may be used to understand an individual's feelings about and fondness (or lack of fondness) for a character that is not a role the individual is playing, but it can't be used in cases where an individual might feel that s/he *is* the character. In simpler terms, there is no way to study video game characters as a whole using these concepts singularly.

Additionally, though we are mainly focusing on role-playing games and games in which the main character is customizable, this idea of attachment can even be used in the study of other genres of games, such as first-person shooter games, action/adventure games, and racing games where you are still in control of some sort of being. In fact, the only genre of game where attachment could not be applied would be in puzzle games such as *Tetris* or *Dr. Mario* where there is no being and no narrative environment in which to place that being.

*What are the theoretical backgrounds used in the creation of **attachment**?*

The concept of parasocial interaction was developed in 1956 by Horton and Wohl, defined as a "relationship on the part of a television viewer of friendship or intimacy with a remote media 'persona'" (Rubin, Perse, Powell, 1985, pg. 156). At the time, television was *the* medium for communication, though parasocial interaction has also been applied to radio as well. However, this theory began as a way to explain the sometimes-dramatic attachment that viewers can form to television characters.

According to Ashe and McCutcheon, parasocial interaction involves "one-sided relations in which one party knows a great deal about the other but the relationship is not reciprocal" (2001, pg. 125). The relationship obviously cannot be reciprocal because one of the parties has no idea that the other even exists. Though there is no contact between the two sides, the viewer begins to feel as if he or she knows the persona. "The persona offers, above all, a continuing relationship. His appearance is a regular and dependable event, to be counted on, planned for, and integrated into the routines of daily life. … In time, the devotee—the 'fan'—comes to believe that he 'knows' the persona more intimately and profoundly than others do; that he 'understands' his character and appreciates his values and motives" (Horton and Wohl, 1956, pg. 218).

The control of the relationship also rests in the hands of the performer (Horton and Wohl, 1956, pg. 215). In classic parasocial interaction theory, the TV personality is responsible for controlling the relationship. The

performer is responsible for what is shared with the viewing audience and what is not. The viewers have no input into the relationship, but instead, must accept the manner of presentation that is given to them.

But control is problematic. Despite the use of PSI to indicate a friendship, this is not a true reflection of real life. An individual would never expect to be able to exert control on his or her friends, so this concept is not exactly one of friendship but of attachment; we expect players to *care* about their characters. Not only is there an interaction between character and video game player, but there is also the sense of identification. As defined by Cohen, identification consists of four dimensions. The first is empathy, the sharing of the feelings of the character. The second is the taking of the character's perspective. Third is the internalization of the goals and motives of the character, and finally, absorption into the medium, or the loss of self-awareness (Cohen, 2001). In addition to Cohen's definition of identification, we may also find Goldie's idea of imaginative identification to be of use as well (2000). This involves not only an empathy for someone but also the ability to "put oneself in another's shoes," a reinforcement of Cohen's ideas of empathy and perspective-taking. As well, Oatley (1999) discusses the idea of internalization and psychological merging to create a feeling of attachment to a character.

Social presence theory is based, essentially, on a communicator's sense of awareness of the presence of an interaction partner (Short, Williams, & Christie, 1976). This also deals with perceived intimacy and immediacy of the interaction, as well. Much social presence research has been done regarding computer-mediated communication (CMC) to show that, though there are electronic barriers between individuals, the person on the other end of the computer connection is still perceived as being "present". For instance, research by Gunawardena (1995) reports that even though CMC is usually seen as being low in social cues, those using it can perceive it as being active and stimulating. Additionally, work by Klimmt and Vorderer (2003) discusses the link between presence and involvement, extrapolating that presence may be thought of as a special case of involvement (p. 348). They explain that "a media environment that is designed to elicit strong feelings of presence, then, should try to create the illusion of a nonmediated spatial environment or social entity and to get the users emotionally and cognitively involved in order to make them want to continue and intensify the experience" (2003, p. 349). Thus, even though a video game character is not a living, breathing individual by any means, the character still has a degree of social presence that can in fact influence and affect the individual playing the game.

In relation to the idea of presence, individuals can respond to a character as if it *were* another person. This is also similar to phenomena found using the media equation theory—people react to computers as if they had feelings and behaved like a human being (Reeves and Nass, 1996). Therefore, the more realistic a video game character seems, the more realistic the video game environment seems, and the more the player feels a part of this environment, the more he or she is going to react to the environment and, consequently, the character contained in the environment, as if it were a human being.

We have now discussed the basic theories that are related to the idea of attachment and form a part of the greater whole, but we cannot simply combine several previously existing theories to form a new idea. There must be a rationale behind the creation of *attachment*.

Why is the creation of this concept useful?

We intend to use the idea of attachment to study a number of dependent variables in game players in various panels in the next several months. We wish to observe whether or not the independent variable of attachment has any effect on the dependent variables of game preference, playing time, risk-taking behavior with the character, self-esteem and perceived game success, and social motivation for playing the video game.

It is not enough to say that we are merely going to put together theories already in place to create a new idea. We must have a reason. As previously stated, the theories in existence currently can only be used to explain a part of a video game player's behavior. Parasocial interaction helps to explain the idea of a friendship of sorts, or a one-way relationship; presence helps to explain why people react the way they do to games; and identification helps to explain the decisions and emotional responses people have to games. However, these are all separate ideas and can only be used to study certain types of games for each theory. Creating the idea of attachment and, eventually, a scale with which to measure attachment will allow us a generalizability of measure and idea that was previously unavailable.

Conclusion

Depending on relationships found, there could potentially be beneficial results and effects for the video game industry. If it is found that higher degrees of attachment result in longer playing time, higher desire to play a certain video game, and higher desire for a certain *type* of video game, the industry may wish to take the results into consideration and consider the types of character designs used in video games to produce characters with whom game players feel more attachment. It may also be useful in the area of educational video games, to assist in determining a way to make the games more enjoyable, and therefore more useful, for the children playing them.

For example, if attachment is related to perceived game success and, consequently, self-esteem, we may take another step toward understanding how video game play might affect personality and social skills. Research by Turner (1993) found that self-esteem is indeed linked to the proclivity toward parasocial interaction measures. People also show high degrees of perceived similarity, attraction, and love toward favorite television characters, showing the link between parasocial interaction and the concept of identification in the notion of similarity. In a study conducted by McDonald and Kim, "the evidence suggests that children identify quite closely with electronic characters and that these identifications have implications for children's emotional well being and the development of their personality" (2001, pg. 1).

This can also provide a starting point for additional future research. For instance, does a more realistic-feeling video game (i.e. a video game with a high degree of presence) have an affect on attachment? Should the industry consider this? Or would identification lead to a higher feeling of attachment, and thus, would customizable characters be advisable to have if attachment is indeed found to have a positive effect on game sales, preferences, etc.? If we wish to study video game characters in depth and if we desire to find ways in which we can apply methods of study to not just one small part of the area of game characters but to the entity of game characters as a whole, we need ideas and theories that can be applied to

video gaming as a whole. The concept of attachment will thus allow us a constant measuring stick with which to study effects of characters *on* game play and motivations *for* game play.

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